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PSALM 103: AN INTERPRETATION.

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*Praise the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
And forget not all his blessings;
Who has forgiven all your sins,
And has healed all your diseases;
Who has redeemed your life from the grave;
Who has crowned you with kindness and mercy;
Who has satisfied your desire¹ with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like an eagle.*

*Yahweh does deeds of salvation;
He brings justice to all who are oppressed.
He made known his ways unto Moses,
To the children of Israel his acts.
Yahweh is merciful and gracious,
Long-suffering and rich in lovingkindness.
He will not always chide,
Neither will his anger continue forever.
He does not treat us according to our sins,²
Nor does he reward us according to our iniquities.
But as the heaven is high above the earth,
So high³ is his mercy toward those who fear him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far does he remove our sins from us.
As a father pities his children,
So Yahweh pities those who fear him.*

¹ Following the Greek translation.

² *Lanu* and *'alēnu*, being later additions, are to be omitted.

³ *Gabah*.

*For he knows our nature,
 He considers that we are dust.
 A man's life is like the grass,
 Like the wild flowers he flourishes.
 If the wind passes over them, they are gone,
 And their place knows them no more.
 But Yahweh's mercy endures⁴ to everlasting,
 And his faithfulness unto children's children,
 With those who fear him,⁵ who keep his covenant,
 And who remember to obey his commandments.*

*Yahweh has established his throne in the heaven,
 And his dominion extends over all things.
 Praise Yahweh, you his angels;
 You strong heroes, who execute his word!⁶
 Praise Yahweh, all his host,⁷
 You his servants, who perform his will!
 Praise Yahweh, all his works,
 In all places of his dominion.⁸*

IN the first part of this song the pious poet tells his story: he had been attacked with a severe illness and had been near death. Nor had he been in doubt that God had sent him his suffering as a punishment and a chastisement, according to the belief of the pious of his time that disease was a divine punishment for sin. But when he humbled himself before the Lord, God forgave him his sin and took his disease from him. Now he is freed from all suffering and all guilt. He has been preserved from going down into the grave (*i. e.*, Hades), whither, according to the belief of ancient Israel, the dead must go.⁹ God has "crowned" him with kindness and mercy; he has

⁴ "From everlasting" is omitted here on account of the rhythm in Hebrew.

⁵ These words are transposed to this place from the preceding verse for rhythmical reasons.

⁶ The words "hearkening unto the voice of his word," are a later addition.

⁷ This word is in the singular; *cf.* Ps. 148:2.

⁸ The conclusion, "Praise Yahweh, O my soul," is probably a liturgical addition.

⁹ *Cf.* Ps. 16:10.

adorned him with them as with a beautiful turban, which is worn at the time of a festival:¹⁰ God makes him celebrate festivals, in compensation for the former days of mourning and lamentation. He is now satisfied with all the good things which he previously desired and which he then sadly missed. A restored life lies before him; he feels fresh and new, as though he were young again: he has had the same experience as the eagle, of which a story similar to the one known about the phoenix must have been current among the people. Therefore he is full of gratitude, and he pours forth his soul in a psalm of thanksgiving: "Praise the Lord, O my soul!" In order to understand the expression, "all that is within me," we must recall that in the popular psychology of the Hebrews not only the heart, but also the kidneys and the liver (or the "bowels" in general) were the seat of the mental and spiritual life.

The form of this song is well known to us from other Hebrew literature. The first two verses are a lofty introduction which, after the manner of Hebrew hymns, summons to the praise of God. Such a call is originally addressed by the leader to the choir: "Sing, ye pious, a song of praise to Yahweh!" But here the poet, departing in a striking way from the usual custom, addresses his own soul. In this we recognize a personal element: he summons himself to praise God. He will not forget, as men too often do, the help that God has given him; rather will he cherish the thought of it.

There are parallels also for the repetition of the beginning in the second verse (Pss. 124:1 ff.; 129:1 ff.) The origin of this impressive figure of speech may be found in the custom of the choir to repeat the words of the leader.

The following verses tell of the blessings which God has bestowed upon the poet, and their form is the one common in the hymns; the single blessings of God are enumerated by participles of words denoting his actions, a form rendered in English by relative clauses.

But the enthusiasm of the poet is not exhausted with this praise of God for the salvation of his person; he adds a hymn

¹⁰ A simile like this is found in Prov. 3:3.

of a more general character than his personal prayer of thanks. God's lovingkindness embraces, not only him, but all pious men. In the same way as God has forgiven his sins, he pardons all who fear him. Thus he sings in this second part of his poem of God's mercy which is shown unto Israel and the pious when they sin.

The poet recalls the fundamental revelation of God, when Moses had asked him: "Show me thy way" (*i. e.*, show me the ways which thou goest¹¹). The old legend tells that at that time Yahweh passed before Moses in his own person, and that Moses, standing in the cave of the mountain, heard the words: "Yahweh is a merciful and gracious God, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth."¹² These are the ways which he goes, the law of his acting. This sentence had become a sort of creed of the pious, being often quoted;¹³ and such words are taken up and continued here by the poet, who at the same time intersperses them with the most beautiful sentences from the prophecies of salvation. "He will not always chide:"¹⁴ it is true, he chides at times, and he must chide, when sin offends him; but he will not chide forever. He also forgives; he does not destroy, he only chastises. "He does not treat us according to our sins;" if he did so, we should be undone. He acts more lovingly toward us than we deserve.

This mercy of God is described by the poet in two forcible pictures: As high as the heaven is, so high is his mercy;¹⁵ as far as the east is from the west, so far is our guilt removed from us by his merciful decree. This simile is based upon the idea that guilt dashes upon the sinner, in order to "reach" him and to ruin him; but God's mercy keeps it far away from him—and how far!

It is noticeable how the conduct of God is here described: he rules over men with unlimited sovereignty; he has power to punish them for their sins or to forgive them, as he will; but neither mediatorship of a person nor atonement is mentioned.

¹¹ Exod. 33: 13.

¹³ Pss. 86: 15; 145: 8; Joel 2: 13; Neh. 9: 17; etc.

¹² Exod. 34: 6.

¹⁴ Isa. 57: 16; Jer. 3: 5, 12.

¹⁵ The same thought is expressed in Pss. 36: 6; 57: 11. See also Isa. 55: 9.

This is the position always taken by the psalmists and prophets, differing from that of the priestly post-exilic law code, where divine forgiveness is connected with the atonement of the priest.

Two similes are combined here, which are taken from the same sphere, and yet are contrary to each other; the first speaks of the vertical, the second of the horizontal dimension; this combination appears to the Hebrew idea of style especially ingenious. And even a third simile is added by the poet, the one which is nearest to the New Testament and therefore also to our hearts—that of the father who pities his children.

These words concerning God's mercy and lovingkindness meant even more to the pious men in Israel than to us. For at that time the gospel of God's love of the sinner, as it was later made known by Jesus, had not been heard. The Israelites had long been accustomed to emphasize the grand, awe-inspiring character of God: God spoke to them in flashes and peals of thunder; Yahweh hurled himself into battle with a dreadful war-cry and swept away whole generations of men in his anger! All the sweeter, then, these words of God's kindness and mercy.

In the next lines the poet describes the thoughts of God which make him feel compassionate toward the sinner. God thinks of our feebleness and frailty. We are nothing but a frame of dust,¹⁶ and our life is short like the life of the wild-flowers that quickly wither away before the hot breath of the desert and are consumed so that the place where they have stood no longer remembers them.¹⁷

But now the poet returns to his theme; he puts the eternity of God's mercy, which lasts unto all generations, into powerful contrast with the shortness of human life. This description of the short life of man and the comparison with the flowers is not peculiar to this poet; for the poets of the Hebrew dirges used to mention the shortness of human life in order to move God to leniency,¹⁸ and in the hymns the same thought was used to emphasize the eternity of God.¹⁹ Both ideas are combined here by our poet.

¹⁶ This is a reminiscence of the story of creation, Gen. 2:7.

¹⁷ Cf. Job 7:10.

¹⁸ Cf. Job, 14:2; Ps. 102:12.

¹⁹ Isa 40:6 ff.; Ps. 90:6.

At the end of this second portion of the psalm the poet emphasizes once more that God's mercy applies only to those who desire to serve him. He forgives their sins when they perchance fail. But, as is always said in the Psalms, to the wicked who are disobedient to God, he is not a merciful but a wrathful God.

The third and concluding portion of the psalm treats of God's power in heaven and in all the world; for the song stretches its wings higher and higher, as it were, and draws its circles wider and wider. The ancient Israelite, too, realized God's omnipotence by imagining him sitting on his throne in heaven; from there he overlooks the universe, and all things lie at his feet. This idea is common to many other peoples as regards their highest god, viz., the god of heaven or the sun-god.

And now the poet imagines all the beings that serve before God, his messengers and strong heroes, his host of war and his servants who execute his commands.

Finally, even the whole creation, with all its many spheres, filled everywhere with God's works, presents itself to his eye. All these beings are to begin an immense psalm of praise filling heaven and earth! A conclusion worthy of this lofty psalm.

As to their form, the words, "Praise Yahweh, you his angels," etc., are a hymn, or the beginning of a hymn. Of the history of the ideas about the "angels" we have quite a detailed notion: originally Yahweh was imagined as a powerful general who commands a large "host" of warlike knights, and with them fights his battles in heaven; or he was thought to be a mighty king, who himself resides quietly in his palace, but sends thence his "messengers" (in Greek *ἄγγελοι*, "angels") all over the world. Both ideas were fused into one another in later times; and this may be seen in our psalm also.

Finally, let us appreciate the psalm. The thoughts and the similes of this song are not original within Old Testament lyrical poetry. But it would be a great injustice to find in this psalm nothing but a "judicious compilation of all kinds of beautiful sentences from quite an extensive reading." For it certainly is no accident that to the Christian community this very poem

became especially dear. How many a pious man, in a joyous hour, has expressed his thanks to God with these lofty verses! We must rather say that the psalmist has known how to express the noblest thoughts of the Old Testament religion in simple, grand words. The beautiful poem is a forecast of the New Testament in the Old. When the same or similar words are connected with many historical allusions or accidental facts, as in the prophets and in the book of Job, they do not make such a deep impression on us as in the psalm, where they appear to us in their pure beauty and their full power.